

Dia Art Foundation

# CA Conrad and Cecilia Vicuña

Readings in Contemporary Poetry

Tuesday, April 5, 2016, 6:30 pm

## Introduction by Vincent Katz

An early bio of **CA Conrad's** says he is the son of white trash asphyxiation, whose childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. He is the author of eight books of poetry and essays, including *A Beautiful Marsupial Afternoon* and *The Book of Frank*. His latest book, *ECODEVIANCE: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* (Brooklyn and Seattle: Wave Books, 2014), received the 2015 Believer Magazine Book Award. In 2015, Conrad was an artist in residence at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Sausalito; and he has received numerous other fellowships. Conrad lives and writes in Asheville, North Carolina.

CA Conrad's book *Ecodeviance: (Soma)tics for the Future Wilderness* is composed of descriptions of rituals, invented by Conrad, followed by poems written as a result of engaging in those rituals. As he puts it, in his introduction, "These rituals create what I refer to as an 'extreme present' where the many facets of what is around me wherever I am can come together through a sharper lens." With the implication that this is true for the observer as well, or maybe, hopefully, there can be no such thing as an observer of one of Conrad's rituals, but rather only participants. We shall see.

Conrad astutely observes human physical relations in the ritual "Unknown Duration of Fear," dedicated to Dawn Lundy Martin. He observes that "You do not touch a stranger at the checkout counter, unless it's an accident... You are not gong to hold the stranger's hand while they cut meat because you will be called insane and asked to leave..." Many of the (Soma)tics involve engaging in just those activities which, not harmful in themselves, and arising from the most natural impulses, do seem to provoke the most extreme reactions from the unsuspecting members of the public they are directed at.

The resulting poems are different. The poems in *Ecodeviance* meander, finding their own pace and language — occasionally, but rarely, erupting into the stronger emotions of the rituals. Here is the beginning of "A Human Being Realizes They are Alone for the First Time in 12 Hours":

to appropriate our  
dreaming together  
we no longer asked  
for our deliverance

Near the end of the same poem, Conrad writes:

I would love you if I knew how to make the song  
a better system lit from the edges  
take a second to calm down  
maybe another  
Okay  
okay

So, ultimately these rituals, and their concomitant poems, are not about anger, but about connection. Even when that connection fails, desire for it fuels these poems. Prepare to engage. Please join me in welcoming CA Conrad to Dia.

**Cecilia Vicuña** is a poet, visual artist, filmmaker, and activist, whose work addresses pressing concerns including ecological destruction, human rights, and cultural homogenization. In her poems, she uses humor and literary inquiry as means to engage with themes of language and memory, with particular attention to decay and exile. Vicuña has published twenty-two art and poetry books, including *Saborami* (originally published in 1973 by Beau Geste Press, UK; second edition by ChainLinks, 2011), *Cloud Net* (New York: Art in General, 2000), *Instan* (Berkeley, Calif.: Kelsey Street Press, 2001), *Spit Temple: The Selected Performances of Cecilia Vicuña* (edited and translated by Rosa Alcalá (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2012), and *Kuntur Ko* (Tornsound, 2015). A new volume of *Selected Poems* is forthcoming from Kelsey Street Press in 2016. Vicuña is the co-editor with Ernesto Livon of *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Grosman, 2009). Her art has been exhibited at and collected by the Tate Modern, London; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Chile, Santiago; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She lives and works in New York City.

Art historian Roberto Tejada has observed, "Vicuña's work, at its very essence, is 'a way of remembering'—as if exile and recall joined to unravel an 'autobiography in debris' as one personal story within a larger narrative." During the summer of 1973, Vicuña made an

object a day, an effort, she explains in *Sabor a mi*, in support of the Chilean revolutionary process. In essence, all her work partakes of a similar ritualistic process, sometimes expressing outrage, other times healing, and others simply forging important connections, both synchronically and diachronically.

Vicuña is fond of saying that her poems are composed in performance and only later collected into book form. That is certainly true of *Spit Temple*, her collection of performance transcriptions. What is amazing, in person, or reading the book, is the precision of her word choices. Like any improviser, she is making lightning-quick decisions that sometimes dead-end, but even the dead ends are fascinating. Most of the time, however, her mental, physical, aural, and emotional movements are finely tuned to *lead* to another place, and, getting to that place, the audience is amazed and gratified.

In her poem "Clepsydra," Vicuña writes:

I relied from the beginning  
on my stupidity  
and general lack of talent.  
Always I shipwrecked among  
nouns and verbs.  
I am still, I feel,  
a shitty preacher:  
I enlighten no one  
but me.

On the contrary, enlightening herself, she enlightens and delights those around her. Tonight, the lucky ones are us. Please join me in welcoming Cecilia Vicuña.